

How the COVID-19 Pandemic will Contribute to Complicated Grief

- **Concurrent loss.** Survivors may be coping with concurrent crises—factors that complicate grief. Because of the disruption of life caused by the pandemic, grieving individuals may be coping with multiple losses—of people they love, of jobs or income, or any other non-death loss created by the pandemic.
- **Trauma.** COVID-19 deaths can be sudden and unpredictable. The virus has required treatments that are violent and traumatic by nature, such as intubation. In addition, someone who seemed to be recovering may take a sudden downward turn and die unexpectedly
- **Perceptions of preventability.** These may be exacerbated for reasons including the random nature of the disease, contracting the disease while working, governmental failure to impose safety measures, exposure by those not taking precautions, and contraction of the illness from asymptomatic carriers.
- **Survivor guilt.** People may struggle with why their loved one died and they survived, especially if both were infected. There can also be guilt arising from the thought or suspicion that the mourner was the source of infection.
- **Anger and disenfranchisement.** For non-COVID-19 deaths, there may be anger that the emergence of the disease limited or compromised their ability to support/love the dying person, conduct a proper funeral/memorial service, or perform other personally meaningful death rituals, leaving mourners feeling disenfranchised. For COVID-19 survivors, there may be anger regarding the quality of treatment by healthcare providers or lack of protection provided by nursing homes.
- **Cumulative grief.** For Black Americans, the pandemic’s disproportionate infection and death rate in communities of color underscores the concept of pre-existing “cumulative grief,” the result of centuries of racial injustice in the United States.
- **Spiritual questions.** Survivors may question their long-held belief systems that were central to their lives, wondering why this disease emerged and why it killed someone they loved.
- **A “bad” death.** One of the most difficult aspects of the pandemic is that those who are dying in hospitals or nursing homes are often dying alone—the very antithesis of our image of a good death. Not only does the company of others ease pain and anxiety about dying, but it also facilitates the subsequent adjustment of survivors. It offers family and friends the opportunities to say goodbye, finish business, and share memories. For dying persons, the presence of these significant others validates their life, allows them to say final words, and offers the comfort and care that family and friends can provide.
- **Isolation.** Quarantines, travel restrictions, and limits on gatherings impair the rituals surrounding dying and death. Chaplains and other clergy may be unable to be present to offer deathbed rituals such as prayers or last rites. Funeral rituals are limited or postponed, the comfort of family and friends is restricted with hugs and touch absent. Even support from counselors or support groups is likely to be offered online—missing, to some degree, that critical human connection.

(From the Funeral Service Foundation, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Hospice Foundation of America, Association for Death Education and Counseling, and the Center for Complicated Grief)